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Governor



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June 25, 2012

President Bruce Shepard
Western Washington University
Old Main 440
516 High Street
Bellingham, WA 98225-9000

Dear President Shepard:

I am writing to you with grave concerns about the new collective bargaining agreement between Western Washington University and the United Faculty of Western Washington University.

My signature is barely dry on the budget — a budget that protected funding for higher education. Together, we celebrated that very difficult victory. The Legislature and I fought together to keep all of higher education from slipping backward. But we never intended significant salary increases for faculty employees at the same time higher education institutions raise tuition on our students.

In addition, the Legislature and I fought for long-term increased tuition setting authority for public four-year institutions of higher education. In particular, Western Washington University was granted the authority to increase tuition up to 16 percent, a rate greater than any other regional university and on par with the University of Washington and Washington State University. The Legislature granted this authority expecting institutions would exercise it considering the needs of students and parents who bear the burden of tuition increases.

The Legislature granted to institutions of higher education great autonomy in their labor relations practices with faculty staff. The law allows institutions to negotiate an agreement that extends beyond the current fiscal biennium. Agreements are not subject to review by the Office of Financial Management for financial feasibility. No action by the Legislature is required for the agreement to go into effect.

In the worst economic times in 80 years, I am surprised that Western has entered into a collective bargaining agreement that provides for a salary increase of 5.25 percent effective in 2012 -2013, a 4.25 percent salary increase each year during the 2013-2015 biennium, a 10 percent increase for faculty and instructors who are promoted, and an additional 15 percent increase in stipends for department chairs.



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Your agreement seems to ignore the shared sacrifice that other state employees in general government and institutions of higher education have made during the Great Recession. During the last 4 years, general government employees have had their salaries frozen or reduced through furloughs and agreed to a 3 percent temporary salary reduction. Classified staff at institutions of higher education, including those at Western, have had their salaries frozen or reduced by 3 percent. Faculty at other institutions have also agreed to salary freezes; salaries for faculty at University of Washington and Washington State University were frozen by the Legislature (ESSB 5860). The institutions have the authority to strategically increase salaries to recruit or retain specific faculty, a model I believe Western should have pursued. Lastly, other elected officials and I have voluntarily reduced our salaries along with other state employees. While I recognize that the Legislature provided an exception from the salary freeze in ESSB 5860 for agreements negotiated under Chapter 41.76 RCW, I believe the intention was to recognize obligations under existing agreements and not to enable further salary increases of this magnitude at this time.

While I share your concerns about retaining and attracting quality faculty, I am perplexed at how Western Washington University can afford these compensation increases currently and into the next biennium. Washington has not recovered from the recession. Our unemployment rate hovers at 8.3 percent. The state's revenues remain flat. I sincerely hope that the faculty salary increases will not be paid for by the tuition increases Western imposed upon its students.

The challenges in balancing our next biennial budget and protecting education will be daunting without new revenue. I believe the agreement between Western and its faculty will hurt current and future efforts to protect and increase funding for public higher education. Moreover, I believe it erodes confidence that institutions will prudently exercise the autonomy and flexibility granted to them by the Legislature.

Sincerely



Christine O. Gregoire
Governor

cc: Board of Trustees